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The Vere Gordon Childe Centenary Conference

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# THE VERE GORDON CHILDE CENTENARY CONFERENCE

PETER BEILHARZ

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Imagine a smallish group of specialist scholars ensconced together for days on end, scholars with very different fields of interest and expertise, eating breakfast together in halls talking animatedly over their shared enthusiasm, listening to different papers, discussing again, and more still over lunch, more papers, then wine, and food, and more talking till late. It could be an Italian conference on the work of Antonio Gramsci; it could have been the 1980 Follonica Conference on the political thought and action of Leon Trotsky. This particular occasion was in Brisbane, from the 23rd to the 26th of September 1990. The polymath was not Gramsci, or Trotsky, but Vere Gordon Childe. The Australian Studies Centre of the University of Queensland organised a centenary conference for Childe, which brought together a small, stimulating and extraordinarily convivial bunch of folks working across all kinds of disciplines, but especially interested in two themes: Childe's politics, and his archaeology (and the question of the relationship between them).

As Terry Irving and others have shown, Childe's shift into archaeology has too frequently been rendered as a process whereby Childe allegedly turned his back not only on Australia but also on his socialism. This 'marxism as measles' approach to biography is common enough among conservative scholars—if you're not a socialist at twenty you've no heart, if you are afterwards, you've no head, etcetera etcetera. Yet Childe remained consistently committed to socialism throughout his life. His major political-historical work, *How Labour Governs* (1923), was not a rejection of socialism but a castigation of what came to be known as labourism. And his shift to Britain, and to archaeology, was entirely consistent with his socialism. He was a scholar of the red tie, an impish, yet solitary man, a strong yet finally tragic figure who ended his own life in the Blue Mountains in 1957 rather than grow old in circumstances which he felt unable to control. He was a leading Australian socialist, and the conference appropriately represented a celebration of his life, his contribution to socialism and to scholarship alike.

On Sunday, 23 September, I flew to Brisbane and caught a cab to Emmanuel College, where the conference was held. There I met Peter Gathercole, of Darwin College, Cambridge—Childe's impending new biographer, and Michael Roe, of Hobart. Together we set out on a guided tour, 'in the steps of Gordon Childe'. It is, of course, rather difficult to follow those imprints left by Childe in Brisbane after the Great War. The city has changed a great deal. Yet the exercise was both fruitful and pleasant, and its spirit was to anticipate that of the conference itself. An evening, welcome barbecue followed. Archaeologists, sociologists, students of politics and history found themselves conversing animatedly, even though they had nothing in common save for this shared enthusiasm for Gordon Childe. Where had he been, in Brisbane? What work had he done? Who exactly had taught him at Sydney, and who had he kept company with? What was the nature of his relationship with Jack Lindsay? What was it about his milieu which had enabled him to practise as a marxist in the period of the thirties without falling

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into the cliched manacles of economic or technological determinism? Had he known Guido Baracchi? What was his theory of evolution exactly? What was his exact relationship to the Workers' Education Association? Why had he chosen to commit suicide?

Monday morning the papers commenced, and all these issues were raked more carefully. The Queensland Minister for Education—surely the first in some years to fraternise with such subversives—struggled nobly to convince the conference participants that his own government could claim direct lineage from Childe. It reminded me of the various earlier attempts to appropriate Gramsci for reform or for revolution, and of the similar story in which William Morris had been appropriated as a precedent by fabians, communists and aesthetes alike. In its own way, the issue anticipated a series of positions which opened up over the following days—was Childe primarily an archaeologist, or was he rather a socialist who also did archaeology? Were his politics closer to those of syndicalism, as had been suggested in the past, or to marxism (and if so, which sort?) Or was his beacon that of guild socialism, or of social democracy?

Robin Gollan took up some of these kinds of issues in his opening address. The author of the now-classic *Radical and Working Class Politics* spoke of Childe's impact, of the power of the argument in *How Labour Governs*, of Childe's own status as a kind of beacon for those who set out in the postwar period to address and to explain the problems of labourism in Australia. After morning tea Peter Gathercole continued this part-biographical, part intellectual pursuit of Childe. Gathercole was taught by Childe. He did not get to know Childe well—nobody did. But he told me later that he knew Childe had sensed his own radical politics, asking Gathercole in a lecture what historic events had happened in 1859 (Gathercole got it right, not just the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, but also that of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). Gathercole is a fascinating man, the kind of person you find immediately attractive—good humoured, himself impish, passionate about his politics and ideas, and a walking archive, dragging odd letters from Childe to Palme Dutt from his bag or pocket—was it September 1938? 'No, October, and you can tell from Childe's habitual use of borrowed letterhead that he was in . . .' Gathercole unwittingly came to function as the voice of Childe in the proceedings, but never in a way which was perfunctory or heavy handed. Indeed, he spent most of the time quizzing the others, listening more than talking.

Most conferences get caught up in the exigencies of scheduled speakers who are unable to perform on the day. The two speakers scheduled after lunch on the Monday both were obliged to default. At a large conference, this would have meant a cancellation notice in texta on a piece of butcher's paper. At this, smaller, closer, conference Greg Melleuish and Rhys Jones stepped in, read the papers over lunch and offered resumes. They made it work, which was extraordinary. Melleuish presented Tim Murray's paper on Timescales and Archaeological Ontology. Murray's argument was suspended on a distinction which apparently eluded non-specialists, that between 'processual' and 'post-processual' archaeology. Childe was apparently rendered obsolete both by radiocarbon dating and by his ontological obsolescence. From my own perspective, the situation was reminiscent of that evoked by much postmodern argument in the social sciences—its claims to novelty make it difficult for outsiders to assess. At the very least, however, Murray's paper indicated to those outside archaeology that there were clear and strong, partly generational disputes which seem to be sundering the Australian archaeological

community. There does seem to be in archaeology a sense of crisis which has no obvious parallel to any other liberal discipline I know; there are always those who, for example, are willing to pronounce sociology or history to be in crisis, but this often seems to be a dispute governed by the credentialling needs of the 'outsiders' as much as by the perennial struggle of the younger to establish their claims against the disciplinary elders. Rhys Jones then offered an interpretation of Richard Schaedel's paper, 'Childe 50 Years Later'. Schaedel's concern was to re-read Childe against new light thrown on the Neolithic or Food-Producing Revolution and then upon the Urban Revolution. Jones displayed a splendid seminar-style, including the listeners into the discussion, feeding back into the concerns of Murray raised by Melleuish.

The first day closed with papers by Colin Richards, of Glasgow, and William Peace, of Columbia (read by Terry Irving). Richards, a young English archaeologist, had actually redone Childe's digs in the Orkneys, on the islands of Skara Brae and Rinyo. With the assistance of the whisky king William Grant, Childe had conducted limited excavations, which had often been held against him, a bit like the way in which historians chide each other for insufficient time served in the archives, or anthropologists for an insufficiently long sentence in the land of the other. Richards' case was different, both more devastating and more insightful, than this. His lantern-slide show illustrated that Childe had got it wrong, that he had misinterpreted his dig as representing primitive communism, when in fact it shows a division of labour and suggests a priesthood rather than the primitive idyll imagined by Morgan and partly by Marx and Engels. Read together with an increasing interest in forms of collective representation or belief in the later Childe, Richards' argument suggested that Childe expanded his concept of culture away from the more limited material, or technological level to which earlier archaeology might seem rationally to be drawn ('history is the history of tools' gives way to the sense that history is symbolic as well as material). Peace's paper took up an equally small yet expansive issue in assessing Childe's used of academic networks in order to attempt to circumvent the pernicious effect of the Cold War. Childe's reputation both via his affiliation with the journal *Past and Present* and the book series which went under the same name put him on the wrong side of the Right, and led to the eventual American banning of his book *History*, published in that series. Childe's politics may have been in the back seat while he parleyed with the whisky king, but they were also always sufficiently close to be put to good use by Childe, or to ill by his various enemies.

Monday night closed with joviality, sufficient to cover over what St Lucia calls Italian food. Tuesday took off with Michael Roe's resplendent control of the cultural facts in Childe's Australian moment. Roe focused upon the *New Outlook* magazine published in Sydney between 1922 and 1923. The author of *Nine Australian Progressives* presented something of the milieu which Childe had shared in Brisbane with Jack Lindsay. The setting had echoes of A.R. Orage's *New Age*. It was also allied to the Workers' Educational Association, a link which was then pursued by Helen Bourke and by Greg Melleuish. Bourke located Childe within the context of Australian Social Democracy between 1914 and 1929. Bourke, widely known as one of the few specialists in the history of Australian social sciences, set out to locate Childe with reference to other vital figures such as W.K. Hancock who drew on the anti-statist, pluralist radicalism which had been far more influential in Britain than in Australia. Both Bourke and Melleuish were able to cast new light on Childe's close, yet marginal relationship to Francis Anderson and the WEA

intellectuals. For a long time we have known that the WEA intellectuals were important, but it was difficult not to leave this conference with the suspicion that we have yet to understand exactly how important they actually were. As Bourke pointed out, the moment of the WEA intellectuals did represent something of a high point in the history of Australian social theory, yet we still do not have a sufficiently clear understanding of it. Melleuish, for his part, located Childe with reference to that other leading expatriate, Elton Mayo, but also further explored the connection with Francis Anderson and Frederick Eggleston.

Next up, Ray Evans set out the detail of Childe's tempestuous political path in Queensland from 1918 to 1919. This was one of those brilliant moments which sometimes result when the historian sets out, expecting to find very little, and discovers that there *is* a story after all. Evans' paper was a vindication of the practice of history, whether there be alleged or real 'crises' in the practice of history or not. His paper made clear the finer detail of Childe's political persecution, and the depth of his commitment to socialism in Maryborough as well as his general good sense when it came to the prospect of departing from a jingoistic and potentially violent local culture. Terry Irving followed on with his views on Childe's plans for the never-to-be-published sequel to *How Labour Governs*. Irving argued among other things that Childe came to an incipient understanding of the centrality of democracy to socialism and its marginalisation by the labourist tradition. Childe was, however, by no means dismissive of the Labor Party, as has so often been suggested; on the contrary, the fact that he could praise the Queensland ALP made it clear that he indeed had some conception of what a 'real Labour Government' might be and ought to do. Andrew Wells' contribution completed the proceedings of the day. Wells set out to interrogate the problem of the limited influence exerted by Childe over the leading labour historians of the postwar period—Fitzpatrick, Fry, Gollan, Turner and Ward. Via a reading of Childe's *History*, Wells suggested some especial affinities between Childe and Ward, partly on the basis that Ward pursued both the theme of the bush worker, central to *How Labour Governs*, and the question of Australian prehistory, alluded to but not researched by Childe in his archaeology. The evening's activities shifted into the conference dinner, where discussion continued and some especially significant letters of Childe were read to the assembled masses.

Wednesday was the final day of the conference. Barry Hindess opened with a paper on sources of disillusion in labour and social democratic politics. Socialists have always been obsessed with the problems of corruption which seem endemic to electoral politics. Hindess brought to bear his well-publicised reservations about class politics and interests, for as he claimed, these notions underpin a whole heritage of argument about betrayal and ratting within the labour movement, none of which is especially enabling for socialists today. Two final formal papers were given prior to the closing panel. Ken Maddock and Peter Beilharz both addressed the question of Childe's relation to the theorems of Roberto Michels in his 1911 classic *Political Parties*. Maddock got perhaps closer than any other to conducting a parallel analysis of Childe's sociology and his archaeology, especially in *The Dawn of European Civilization*. Beilharz argued against the identification of Childe's view of history with the negative philosophy of history in Michels, suggesting rather that Childe was a thinker of contingency. In conclusion, Peter Gathercole, Michael Roe and Terry Irving took the floor to offer closing comments and John Mulvaney formally closed proceedings, combining reminiscence of Childe with an attack on the emptying out of museum collections for political

reasons. Participants dispersed—those who could get onto planes, as the September air strike was now on. Others went to partake of the Historians Conference held simultaneously in St John's College at the University. I managed to escape Brisbane at 6.30 a.m. for Sydney, where I was to attend the Socialist Scholars Conference, another great success—and another story, a thousand participants, keen but cool argument over the future of the Soviet Union, and so on.

Having arrived in Sydney somewhat earlier than expected, I finally found myself in Darling Harbour, trying to make sense of the intense experience of the Conference on V. Gordon Childe. I'd gone with some sense of trepidation, imagining that a very small conference would either be terrific or terrible. I'd gone thinking that I'd probably done about as much work as I could on Childe's thinking, only to realise within hours of the opening that I was wrong. And this is one extraordinary indication of the success of the conference. For conference organisers often vent their illusory hopes, that said conference will be the beginning of, or impetus to, something else (which never happens). The Childe Conference was exceptional. It will lead to more work, to more publication, to more meetings between all the enthusiasts who were lucky enough to meet each other at St Lucia, and who will doubtless link up again, in Canberra and Sydney, in Glasgow and in Cambridge.

So I sat at Darling Harbour, pad on my knee, preparing a paper for the Socialist Scholars and gathering my senses about Childe and his work. The carnival atmosphere of the Harbour reminded me of Childe's anticipation of Ian Turner's later worry, that socialism would become obsolete if capitalism could successfully provide consumerist bread and circuses for the working class. The problem cuts both ways, you think, as you sit there watching kids on their parents' shoulders, ice-creams dripping, eating *al fresco*, water glinting in the sun (in Melbourne it's raining). For as Raymond Williams rightly put it, you can't help but watch these scenes with pleasure if you have any sense of the deprivation with which the working class has lived, historically. These are no longer the docklands with which you'd associate the slogans of Trotskyism or class struggles of the Ironworkers of the forties. They are part of the pleasure and part of the problem which Australian radicals face, after Childe.

Darling Harbour now emptying, frazzled parents jostling with sleeping charges in rickety pushers, it was time for me to head off to the opening session of the Socialist Scholars Conference. It turned out to be a real jamboree, a socialist caravan. As for the Childe Conference, I've never quite had an experience like it. We need more conferences like it, for we need always to avoid succumbing to the sense that we know our own history. What we know, we tend to forget, and what we do not know, we need to learn. The Childe Conference helped to educate me, in both these ways, and in many others, about Childe and his moment. Let us look forward to the ripples.

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